



Mark Overduin, Bejo Seeds Oceano, California

From a young age, Mark Overduin was engrossed in growing things. As a child he would pick seeds out of salads and plant them. Then, he discovered he could buy seeds in packs. There was no looking back!

“Except for having a paper route as a boy, I’ve always been in the seed business,” Mark stated. For the past 26 years (and counting) he has served a number of functions at Bejo Seeds, an international vegetable seed breeding and production company. While growing up in Duarte, in Los Angeles County,



Mark maintained vegetable gardens even in junior high school. Growing food from seed fascinated him, so when he discovered as a high school student that one could make a career out of it, he took a road trip to San Luis Obispo to investigate California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly). He fell in love with the area, located roughly midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. After college, he spent two years working at a vegetable transplant nursery, becoming familiar with traits that distinguish one variety from another. From that experience came the opportunity to become one of the early employees of the U.S. division of Bejo Seeds. And so he settled in to the California coastal area. He and his wife now raise their five children in a home not far from Cal Poly, where they first met.

Bejo (pronounced Bee-Joe in the U.S), like many seed companies, is a family operation. Cor Beemsterboer and Jacob Jong began selecting and breeding vegetable varieties more than a century ago. In the 1970s the families merged to

form Bejo Zaden, which now offers more than 1000 different varieties representing some 50 crops. Though international in character, Mark describes the company culture as organic and open. “Internal ideas and enthusiasms drive changes,” he explains. Worldwide, Bejo Zaden employs well over 1000, with a staff at the U.S. headquarters in Oceano of about 70. The operation of the company remains largely a family affair, with most management positions held by those related to the original founders.

“From yield, yield, yield, to taste, taste, taste,” is the direction Mark sees Bejo's breeding program heading. “I love the business in all of its aspects—working with large commercial growers, learning what home gardeners and small market growers like, searching for diversity.” Mark describes the workings of the company as creative and innovative, and receptive to new ideas. “Vertical gardening will have a place in the future of gardening,” he predicts. “And the local movement is exciting. Decentralization of the world’s food supply is important.” With breeders in Holland, Italy, and many other parts of the world, the company concentrates on evaluating the performance of their seeds in diverse growing conditions—they

participate in over 300 research trials in the U.S. alone. Another trend: Organic production is on the rise, comprising 15% of Bejo's total and continuing to grow.



Bejo varieties are planted in University trials throughout the country and evaluated during field days, like this one in New York.

"Vision takes time," Mark replied, when I asked why he thought Bejo and other family-run seed company persist through the generations. He had recently visited Luther Burbank's home, 100 years after the plant breeder had famously created hundreds of new fruits and vegetables. Plant breeding is a labor of love. It takes many years, and you don't want to pass hard-earned knowledge on to just anyone. When he gets home from work, Mark continues to explore his fascination with growing things in his own 8000 square foot garden. He also enjoys the many perks of living close to the California coast. His family spends time camping on the beach, fishing, and kayaking. And growing lots of vegetables.

Mark's Simple Rules for Successful Vegetable Growing

Know your varieties. And keep records!

Keep experimenting. While you may have your favorite tomato*, breeding advances happen all the time, so keep trying new varieties.

* Mark's current favorite is Tasti-Lee hybrid, "semi-determinate, productive, beautiful, with well-balanced flavor."